DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 183 968 CG 014 156

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TITLE Understanding and Counseling Asian American Students.
PUB DATE 6 Oct 79
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (Daytona Beach, FL, October 6-9, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Asian Americans; Educational Attitudes; Foreign Student Advisers; *Foreign Students; Guidance Programs; Higher Education; *Individual Counseling; Self Concept; *Social Differences; State of the Art Reviews; Student Needs; *Student Personnel Services; Youth Problems

ABSTRACT

Asian American students who encounter personal problems may hesitate to utilize counseling and mental health facilities on campuses, being fearful that family, friends and/or relatives may consider them emotionally unstable. Counselors and mental health workers may lack understanding of language and cultural background of Asian-American students, resulting in frustrations and misunderstandings for both parties involved. Counselors, teachers, administrators, and non-Asian-American students would benefit from more information on diverse cultural backgrounds, acculturation and assimilation problems, counseling implications, and mental disorders involving identity problems for Asian-American students. (Author/BMW)

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# UNDERSTANDING AND COUNSELING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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Presented at the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Annual Convention, Daytona Beach, FL, October 6-9, 1979

CG 014156

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# UNDERSTANDING AND COUNSELING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS*

There are more than six million Americans of Asian origin who live and work in the United States. Some of the people who belong to the Asian-American classification are: Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, East Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi Americans, Korean Americans, Thai Americans, Vietnamese Americans, etc. Generally, the people who came from the continent of Asia to settle permanently in the United States are considered as Asian-Americans. Of the six million, almost 30% are children below the age of 18; over half these Asian-American children were born in the United States.

Today, Asian-American people are to be found in almost every large town in the country and in most industries--textiles, transportation, food-processing, engineering, construction, etc. They no longer consist overwhelmingly of male adult workers leading more or less celibate lives; today the majority are living as families and their basic concerns are, therefore, precisely the same as those of the rest of the American population: a decent home, a suitable job, and good education and fair opportunities for their children.

Many Americans hold stereotyped images of Asian-Americans and thus react to them on the basis of those stereotypes. It is taken for granted that Asians have lower standard of life and when they behave

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in accordance with their cultural environment, this is taken as added proof of their inferiority (Gurdial Singh 1946).

Unlike other militant minority groups in the United States, Asian-Americans have tried to accommodate and function within the American society with least conflict with members of the host society. The Asian immigrants who came to the United States had to struggle for a position in a highly organized American society, where the vantage points were stoutly defended by the American majority groups.

A study of the history of immigration in the United States reveals the general immigration and legal controls imposed upon the Asians (Hutchinson 1953; Wenzel 1968). Their docility, pacific nature, and the public's lack of knowledge about Asian-Americans have masked their problems of unemployment, delinquency, mental disorders, lack of educational opportunities and racial discrimination in American society. Many educators, teachers, counselors and mental health workers believe that the Asian-American students experience no problems because they are seldom seen or heard in the counseling centers or mental health facilities (Kitano 1969).

Those Asian-American students who encounter personal problems may hesitate to utilize counseling and mental health facilities on campuses because they fear that the family, friends and relatives may consider them as emotionally unsound. The Asian-American group

serves as a reference group for these students. This group supports the values in terms by which the students estimate their own conduct; therefore, their line of activity depends upon the real or anticipated reactions of the Asian-American community for whom they are performing. However, these students often prefer to go for vocationally oriented counseling on the campuses because less social stigma is attached to such action than mental health counseling. It is important that counselors and other helping personnel understand the unique problems and cultural backgrounds of Asian-American students so that they could maximize the helping relationship. In fact, however, only a few counselors know of the presence of Asian-American students in schools and colleges and seldom try to understand their cultural backgrounds. A study of Asian-American students' cultural background reveals that the counseling situation may generate a great deal of conflict among the students and their families.

Asian-American Students' Cultural Background

Even though the Asian-Americans have discarded many beliefs and norms which were dysfunctional and troublesome in American society, still they have retained many of the cultural values and traditions of their old countries. The family, as an ancient institution, plays an important role in governing the behavior of students. Family roles are hierarchically stable, clearly defined, and reciprocal duties and

obligations take precedence over individual desires. Families still maintain their hierarchy from generation to generation, and impose ethical standards and a continuity of Asian cultural traditions (Chandra, 1972). Children are taught to enhance the good name of the family by some kind of achievement in life, such as social, academic or economic success. They are taught to guard the honor of the family through socially acceptable behavior. As a result, many students do not like to admit that they have any social, mental or academic problems. Asian-American cultures strongly value self-control and reward the inhibition of strong feelings.

Even today, many Asian-American boys and girls are not free to choose their life goals without the consent of their parents or elders. The group values are supreme over the individual motives. Children are humble and obedient due to their early training in the family traditions.

Studies have showed that the personality traits of Asian-American students reflect their familial and cultural backgrounds. These students seemed to be more conforming to authority, inhibited and introverted than their white counterparts (Chandra 1972; Chandra 1973; Sue & Sue 1972).

Acculturation and Assimilation

Cultural conflict between Asian and American cultures make adjustment difficult for many Asian-American students. They experience

considerable difficulties in conforming to American social patterns of behavior, such as dating, kissing in public, dancing, in relation to authority and the western values they are exposed to in educational institutions and by the mass media. Many American values are at odds with Asian values and thus create culture conflicts among the students.

Observation of Asian-American students frequently shows four types of orientation to culture conflict: (1) Those who become assimilated earlier are more sensitive to the views of outsiders and reject their Asian culture more. Their reference group is made up of other Americans. They have adopted American standards and attempt to "improve" themselves by imitating American ways. (2) Those who reject American values; and emphasize their ethnic identity by going back to their history and civilization to find their roots. They condemn those who are assimilating. The reference group of these students consists of those with whom they identify on an ethnic basis; they seek status in the eyes of their own "kind." (3) Those who stand between these two extremes--partial assimilation and synthesis of both American and Asian cultures. (4) Those who developed their own hybrid culture composed of immigrants from the person's home area. Their reference group consists of others in the minority group; they are not overly concerned with their ancestors or with other Americans.

Students who come for counseling do not fall neatly into any one of the above four groups. In a counseling situation, the types of culture conflicts exhibited by the students depend upon their unique cultural backgrounds.

What are the Implications for Counseling?

The basic purpose of counseling is to assist students to explore and understand themselves so that they can become self-directing individuals (Stone and Shertzer 1971). In this way, counselors carry out a number of functions important to educational, social, and emotional development of students. In short, counselors are an important link to help students deal with problems of school, community, home, and the world.

In the case of Asian-American students, an effective counselor must become very familiar and knowledgeable about Asian cultures if counseling process is to be facilitated. Counselors need to recognize that the student is caught between two cultures, and accordingly must gauge the intensity of this conflict for each student in each situation. An ignorance of these factors may cause the counselee to terminate the counseling sessions prematurely. Many students may find it difficult to admit that they have problems--social, emotional and personal--because they feel that the admission of social and emotional problems may bring shame on them and their families. In such

circumstances, a counselor may facilitate counseling by responding to academic or vocational problems, and then allow the counselee to move at his own rate in exploring more serious emotional problems.

Most Asian-American students approach their counselors with anxiety and apprehension. For instance, recently, a counselor of Vietnamese-American students complained that "they don't respond. They just stand and stare at me. It is very frustrating." This type of attitude on the part of the counselor shows a lack of knowledge of the Vietnamese culture and sympathetic understanding of the problems of these students in school. If an Asian-American student needs counseling, only rarely will he or she be able to receive it from an Asian-American counselor because of the unavailability of Asian-American counselors.

A successful counseling relationship depends upon the assurance of confidentiality between the counselor and the client. Under the circumstances, it is advisable that counselors discuss the issue of confidentiality, trust and cultural barriers in communicating to students about attitudes and feelings. The writer found that when students understand and trust the counselor, they will openly discuss those problems with which they are ready to cope. Many Asian-American students exhibit extreme fear of talking in a group because they don't want their friends, relatives or parents to know that they are seeing

a counselor. Therefore, in group counseling, they are unable to express themselves readily and are often quiet and withdrawn because they perceive their problems as threatening (Sue & Sue 1972). A study by the writer (1974) showed that Asian-American students would be able to participate successfully in the counseling situation once they develop trust of the counselor. It was also found that a direct counseling approach would be more helpful in counseling Asian-American students.

Mental Disorders Involving Personal Identity

Many Asian-American students suffer from a low level of self-esteem. They try to overcome this inadequacy by escaping from themselves. Such compensatory behavior may consist of refusal to look at something threatening; or withdrawal from situations that tend to accentuate their sense of adequacy. Some students isolate themselves from other fellow students. Those who are more rebellious withdraw into a deviant group which provides a way of escaping conventional standards. Some students who feel deficient in the social graces become so engrossed in their studies that their friends no longer associate with them.

Conclusion

Since counselors and mental health workers may lack an understanding of the languages and cultures of Asian-American students, they often face difficulties in counseling these students. In order to understand

the behavior of these students, it is necessary to have a knowledge of their different languages, cultures, and economic status in American society. Also, it may be necessary to modify the traditional counseling approaches to meet the particular needs of the counselees, keeping in mind the establishment of rapport and trust in the counselees. Once a sound counseling relationship has been started, the counselor has greater freedom to vary his counseling approach. Of course, one of the most important tools a counselor would possess is a knowledge of the Asian cultures and the Asian-American experiences in the American society.

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